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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0549  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0170  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0182  
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA PRIORITY 0069  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0518

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000905

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2017  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: SARG SIGNALS NEW VISA REQUIREMENT FOR IRAQIS  
DURING VISIT OF A/UNHCR FELLER

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 119 (B) DAMASCUS 683

Classified By: Charge Michael Corbin for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Confirming what Deputy Foreign Minister Miqdad told UK and other Embassies at a private briefing last week, Syrian dailies reported September 3 that, effective September 10, Iraqis traveling to Syria will need a visa. According to Miqdad, Iraqi PM Maliki proposed this action. Assistant UN High Commissioner for Refugees Erika Feller said MFA and MOI officials had provided only general information about plans to implement the new visa policy, and it remained "ambiguous" how the policy would be enforced. Feller told us that she pressed her SARG interlocutors to issue visas for the DHS circuit riders, but the response was non-committal. She received no guarantees that the Syrians would consider creating a humanitarian visa or refrain from forcibly removing Iraqis, but she did hear deportations would be "highly unlikely." End Summary.

12. (C) NEW VISA REQUIREMENT REPORTEDLY SUPPORTED BY MALIKI: On September 3, Syrian dailies quoted anonymous government sources announcing a new visa requirement for Iraqis entering Syria beginning September 10. These same officials blamed the Iraqi government for failing to provide adequate support to help Syria care for the estimated 1.5 million Iraqis in the country. According to initial reports, Iraqis may now have to pay a 50 USD visa application fee and be subject to income and education criteria. For now, however, the details remain unclear. Rumors of such a move have circulated for months. The SARG started and then canceled plans in February to limit Iraqis to a 15-day stay (Ref A), and is now focusing on a registration drive to keep track of Iraqis within Syria. UK Charge Roddy Drummond told us September 3 that Deputy FM Faisal Miqdad had briefed UK and other embassies the previous week about the new SARG visa requirement, but Miqdad did not go into great detail about how the new requirements would be applied. When asked by Drummond about the Iraqi government's position regarding this requirement, D/FM Miqdad replied that Iraqi PM Maliki had pressed for this policy during his August 19-22 visit to Damascus.

13. (C) JUST IN TIME FOR A/UNHCR FELLER'S VISIT: The SARG's announcement coincided with the September 2-4 visit of Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees Erika Feller (protect). She told us September 3 at a reception for donor

country embassies that the announcement had been expected. Feller expressed concern in press remarks about changing the border regime in a way that would deny entry to Iraqis with life-threatening reasons to leave Iraq. In private meetings at the Foreign and Interior Ministries, Feller said she praised Syria's willingness to receive and provide relief to Iraqi refugees, noting that many countries in the same position might have opted for "a less humane response." Feller reported she pressed Miqdad to issue visas for the DHS circuit riders to interview resettlement cases at the Embassy. Miqdad said he would look into the issue but made no promises. Feller said she also had pressed Syrians to consider adding a humanitarian visa option for Iraqi refugees, but the response was non-committal. Feller urged the SARG not to deport or forcibly remove Iraqis residing in Syria. The SARG, she added, "provided no guarantees," but her interlocutors indicated such action would be "highly unlikely." At the reception, Feller thanked donor countries for their contribution to UNHCR efforts in Jordan and Syria, urging them to be more pro-active on resettlement.

14. (C) MANY DETAILS LACKING: Feller expressed mild frustration regarding uncertainties in the way the SARG's new policy would work in practice. SARG officials had promised to provide her with a written plan during her visit, but thus far she had seen nothing concrete. UNHCR contacts here were skeptical anything would change in practice. UNHCR Rep in Syria Laurens Jolles (protect) posited that it would be unworkable for the SARG to make all Iraqis stand in line for a visa at the Syrian Embassy in Baghdad. "They (the Syrians) lack the staff" in Baghdad, he said, "not to mention the security issues" involved when large numbers of Iraqis showed up to submit their applications. Other UNHCR contacts

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thought that Syrian border officials lacked the means to screen 30,000 Iraqis seeking to cross the border each month and that the SARG would be reluctant to turn great numbers of Iraqis away.

15. (C) ANXIETY IN IRAQI COMMUNITIES: UNHCR and International Office of Migration (IOM) contacts predicted the SARG's decision will dramatically increase uncertainty among Iraqis in Syria. Maria Rumman, IOM Director in Damascus, told us the SARG's announcement had already generated anxiety in Iraqi communities in Syria as well as among some groups in Iraq. She noted that al-Sharqiyya had run several news stories on Iraqi Sunni groups that were blaming Iraqi PM Maliki for the new policy. According to the Iraqi media, these same groups were appealing to Syria to renounce the visa requirement on the basis of Arab Sunni solidarity.

16. (C) A NEW SARG VISA POLICY FOR ALL ARABS? A September 3 article in "Syria Steps," an independent economic news website, reported a government study recommending that Syria institute a visa requirement on other Arab states that do the same for Syrians traveling to their countries. Diplomats and other officials at the UNHCR reception in honor of A/UNHCR Feller were abuzz about the possibility that Syria might drop its pan-Arab mantra on open borders among Arab states in favor of a reciprocity-based policy. (All but Egypt and Lebanon require visas for visiting Syrians.) Most attendees were dubious about such a shift, however. One diplomat called it "a trial balloon," to gauge public reaction, although he was unsure about whom in the SARG would be in favor of such a policy shift.

17. (C) Comment: In February, the SARG came under public and diplomatic fire for imposing a 15-day limit on the stay of Iraqis in Syria, and it quickly abandoned the idea. By comparison, Syria's latest effort to test the visa requirement waters apparently originated as an Iraqi idea and so far has avoided strong criticism from the UNHCR and the international community. Perhaps mindful of this month's media spotlight on Iraq and its neighbors (to include an

upcoming BBC report on Iraqi refugees and two CBS Evening News broadcasts this week from Damascus), SARG officials are proceeding cautiously. It is too soon to say whether Iraqi Sunni appeals in the name of Pan Arab solidarity to avoid further restrictions on Iraqis will gain traction here. Given steady SARG rhetoric blaming the refugees for social and economic problems, we doubt there will be a public retraction but expect implementation will be extremely selective and ambiguous. SARG officials will probably avoid any moves, such as large-scale deportation of Iraqis, that would trigger wide-scale criticism from the Arab world and the international community.

CORBIN